

Phoenix: a Controversial Viet Program

BY STEWART KELLERMAN
UPI Staff Writer

SAIGON—It was a rainy evening and the villagers huddled in their wet straw huts warming themselves by smoky fires. Outside, two young Vietnamese crawled through knife-sharp elephant grass to the outskirts of the village.

One of the youths buried an olive-painted claymore mine in the red-brown mud of the only trail leading into the village. The other strung a wire to a plunger hidden behind a clump of bushes.

The two young men—on the payroll of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—could soon hear the splash of footsteps as the local Communist political leader returned home to spend the night with his family.

They waited patiently, rubber sandals sunk in the mud. The moment the Communist leader reached the mine, they pushed down on the plunger, shattering the evening calm with a deafening roar.

The killing was the work of the Phoenix Program, an allied project aimed at wiping out the political leadership of the National Liberation Front (NLF) with some of the same terrorist tactics the Communists have used against Saigon government officials.

U.S. Involvement

A U.S. Army intelligence officer described the incident to newsmen but demanded the names, location and date be kept secret. His caution was typical of American officials with knowledge of one of the most controversial and least understood programs in Vietnam.

Reliable American sources said the United States, which thought up Phoenix almost four years ago, is still deeply involved in it.

Aside from CIA participation, the U.S. Army has helped set up a massive intelligence apparatus which critics claim has given the Saigon government "big brother" power over much of the population. The sources said U.S. Army intelligence officers also sit unofficially on boards determining the fate of suspected Communists.

Officially, the object of the Phoenix Program is the "neutralization" of the Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI), bureaucratic jargon for the Communist shadow government in South Vietnam.

Reason for Killings

The program, started by South Vietnam in 1968 with the encouragement of U.S. intelligence experts, claims to have neutralized 83,899 Communists since then—20,936 killed, 40,880 jailed and 22,083 talked into switching sides.

Allied officials working in the Phoenix Program usually say the killings have been the result of suspects resisting arrest.

"We don't want to kill any of them," one U.S. adviser said. "We want live ones. A dead man is just a statistic. He can't give us any information. And we have to bury him."

U.S. officials working in related programs and some former Phoenix advisers, however, occasionally tell a different story when speaking anonymously.

"Of course we're killing a lot of VC and torturing a lot of them," one American said. "What else can we do? We're just doing the same thing to the enemy as they're doing to us."

Communist terrorists have made life just as dangerous for government officials. The Saigon government has reported more than 100 Communist terrorist incidents last

year alone, principally against local officials and their relatives.

It was suppertime in a small, rice-farming village in the central highlands of South Vietnam.

The kitchen sounds—scrapping of pots, clinking of glasses and clacking of plates—drowned out the noise of two young Communists walking toward the village.

Family Gunned Down

The two youths, dressed in black pajamas and carrying Soviet-made rifles, walked down the only path leading into town, their rubber tire sandals slapping against the earth.

Without hesitation, they pushed open the door of the biggest building—an unpainted wooden shack where the Saigon government village chief had just sat down for supper with his wife and two children.

The young men then mechanically emptied their rifles into the room and casually walked out of the village, leaving behind four bodies slumped across the table between pieces of broken dishes and glasses.

It was one more Communist terrorist attack against local government officials, village councilmen and ordinary civilians in South Vietnam. Dozens of terrorist attacks take place every day across the country.

"It's easy for somebody to stand up in Congress back in the States and complain about how immoral the Phoenix Program is," one U.S. official said. "But once you've seen the VC gun down village chiefs, kill innocent women and children, you don't feel that way anymore. They're just animals and they've got to be destroyed."

"The only way to fight these animals is to kill them," a U.S. police adviser said. "It's too bad but we haven't done enough killing around here lately. We only got four of them in my district last month."

Controversial Group

Without a doubt, the most controversial men on the Phoenix team are the PRUs, members of province reconnaissance units organized and financed by the CIA, according to Allied intelligence sources.

The sources said the PRUs, mainly former criminals and Communists recruited from jails, are the triggermen for the program's political assassinations. They said the PRUs are also used to arrest especially dangerous suspects and to administer the roughest tortures.

At the start of the program, the typical assassination squad would be made up of four PRUs and two Americans, the sources said. Nowadays, however, the PRUs usually work alone.

They said the PRUs used to get paid piece rates—that is, by the head. But the CIA switched them over to straight salaries—substantially higher than pay scales for South Vietnamese soldiers and police.

Program Aim

Linh is a poor farmer. He grows rice on an acre of land near the South China Sea. He lives with his wife and three children in a cramped hut made of straw and mud.

Linh—like millions of others—has been forced by the South Vietnamese government to spy on his own family for the Phoenix Program.

"I don't want to get into trouble," Linh said through a translator. "That's why I tell the government what they want. I don't tell them everything, of course. Just as much as I have to."

The Phoenix Program has tried to get a gia truong (family head) like Linh to report in every hut, house and shanty in South Vietnam. They're the lowest rungs on a mas-

sive intelligence apparatus providing reports on suspected leaders of the NLF.

The gia truongs don't get any money for their information—just prosecution as suspected Communists if they fail to report accurately on the actions of their families.

Allied sources said the Phoenix program also employs a large network of paid informers.

The reports from informers move up through channels to hundreds of district intelligence operations commands (DIOCs).

Each DIOC is manned by South Vietnamese soldiers, police and psychological warfare specialists as well as an unofficial member from the U.S. Army, American sources said.

U.S. intelligence officers said the DIOCs use the reports to prepare "target folders" on suspected political leaders of the Viet Cong, the Saigon government's name for the NLF.

The officials said green sheets of paper in the folders are used to list such items as physical descriptions, friends and visiting habits of suspects. Pink sheets are used for copies of all agent reports on suspects.

Grading Scale

South Vietnamese Phoenix officials said informants are graded on a scale ranging from A (completely reliable) to F (reliability cannot be judged). They said information provided by agents is graded from 1 (confirmed) to 6 (truth cannot be judged).

DIOC members — after deciding a suspect is likely to be a Communist leader — meet to decide how he should be "neutralized." The suspect can be assassinated, arrested or talked into switching sides.

A former U.S. Phoenix coordinator (adviser) said most DIOCs require at least a C3 rating—agent fairly reliable, information possibly true—before "tar-

geting" a suspect for assassination.

The Phoenix program has not made a very big impact so far in curbing Communist terrorism. The number of attacks dropped from 12,490 in 1963, the first year of the program, to 10,530 in 1969, but they rose again last year to 11,680.

Critics claim Phoenix has led to brutal excesses and has been used by unscrupulous district chiefs to curb political opponents and blackmail suspects.

An American source said in 1969 in one Mekong Delta province the program averaged 40 to 60 "neutralizations" a month.

Ratio Reduced

"When the program started in 1968 we were killing about one-third of the neutralizations," the source said. "But in 1969 the district chiefs got the idea into their heads that the optimum kill ratio was 80%. They began killing every Communist suspect in sight. It was really mad."

The source said U.S. officials in the province—after months of arguing—finally talked the district chiefs into lowering the kill ratio to under 50%.

One Phoenix adviser said terrorist teams sometimes blunder and kill the wrong people.

"If the PRUs knock off four guys by mistake they're simply going to say they're VC. To be truthful, I'd do the same thing myself."

A former U.S. Phoenix adviser described how a district chief used the program to extort money from a relative of a suspect. The chief told one of the biggest rice farmers in his area his son was a Communist guerrilla.

"You know, we've been friends for a long time," the chief reportedly told the farmer. "I just thought I'd warn you that we might have to call you in for questioning. I don't know... humm... you

The next day, according to the former adviser, the farmer showed up at the village chief's office with a bundle of piasters.

"Once you know his relatives in town, a guerrilla is like a bank account for a Phoenix official," one American source said.

Another American official complained that district chiefs sometimes use the arbitrary arrest powers of the Phoenix program to eliminate political opponents.

Careers Ruined

"For some people, like Buddhist monks, being arrested might be a status thing," he said. "But for nationalist politicians, their careers are ruined if they're arrested as Viet Cong suspects. Nobody trusts them again."

After a suspect is arrested, the next step is a trip to a Province Interrogation Center also organized by the CIA, according to Allied sources.

A former U.S. Phoenix adviser said torture is used at the centers although interrogators usually use psychological rather than physical techniques. A couple of favorites are:

—Cover a suspect's face with a wet washcloth. Pour soapy water over the cloth each time he refuses to answer a question. The water isn't supposed to hurt him, but it gives the suspect the impression he's drowning.

—Tie a suspect to a chair and attach wires to a 12-volt car battery. Shock the suspect every time he refuses to answer a question. If he's a really tough customer apply the wires to the genitals.

When the questioning is over, the suspect is brought before a province security committee headed by the local province chief.

Sentencing Power

The committee has the power to sentence a suspect in secret trials to a

maximum of two years in prison. The sentence, however, is renewable indefinitely as long as Vietnam is at war.

U.S. sources said the suspect cannot question his accusers or even find out who they are. "It's pretty much up to the province chief," one official said. "If he's a good man there'll be a fair trial. If he's not, there won't."

"I think it's safe to say that when it's all over not many people get off," one current Phoenix adviser said.

What is the answer to Communist terrorism? Is there a moral way—or a way at all, for that matter—to fight it? No one seems to know.

"There just doesn't seem to be any moral way of fighting them," one South Vietnamese official said. "If we kill them we're called murderers. If we leave them alone, we wind up being murdered ourselves."

A former U.S. Phoenix adviser, now disillusioned with the program, called it "just a big mess, one of the worst aspects of the war."

"Let's say we actually managed to destroy the VC," he said. "To do it, we'd have to turn into people just as bad as them. Either way, the country would wind up in the hands of murderers."